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THE SHIELD



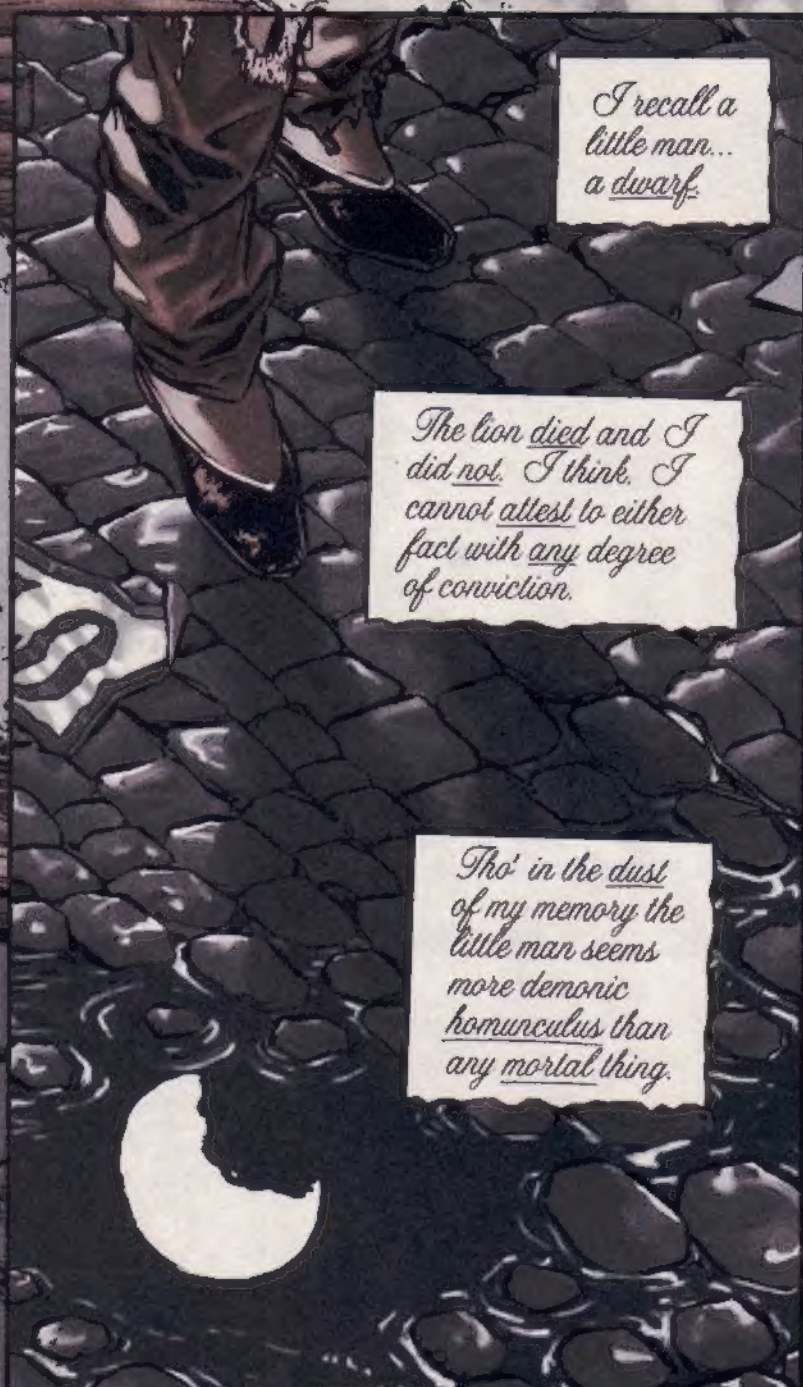
FROM THE PAGES OF **STARMAN**
BY JAMES ROBINSON AND GENE HA





There was some
kind of beast.

From the dark
continent. A lion.
I think a lion.



I recall a
little man...
a dwarf.

The lion died and I
did not. I think, I
cannot attest to either
fact with any degree
of conviction.

Tho' in the dust
of my memory the
little man seems
more demonic
homunculus than
any mortal thing.

I also recall the
screams of people dying...
in torment...in terror.
Among them a girl.
Young. Her eyes,
the brightest things.

But what remains
unanswered - -

What remains lost to
me, no matter how I try
to part the veils of soiled
hemp that fill my head - -

Who am
I?

Where
am I?

And why?

A Family Affair

The Shade
Piers:1838

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ARE YOU SOUND, SIR? ARE YOU WELL?

NO, THOUGH I THANK YOU FOR ASKING ME, I AM UNCLEAR.

I FEAR MY MEMORY HAS BEEN TAKEN.

MY GREAT GOODNESS ME. OH DEAR, MY GOODNESS ME.

THAT IS NOT THE THING. NO SIR, NOT THE THING AT ALL.

ESPECIALLY ON THESE STREETS.

I AM PIERS LUDLOW, COME CLIMB ABOARD. LET ME TAKE YOU WHERE THE CITY AND THE NIGHT ARE BOTH LESS FRAUGHT.

THE SHADOWS OF THESE PARTS HIDE FOOTPADS AND NE'ER-DO-WELLS. WE SHOULD US BOTH AWAY.

WHERE AM I? AND WHAT YEAR?

WHY, THIS IS LONDON, MY DEAR FELLOW. AND THE YEAR IS 1838.



SO YOU ENJOYED YOUR REST?

YES, DID I SLEEP FOR LONG?

OH I SHOULD SAY SO. THO' THIS IS MORNING, IT'S THE ONE THREE DAYS FOLLOWING THE NIGHT I PICKED YOU UP.

YOU SLEPT AS TO BE A DEAD MAN, WHY TWICE MY DEAR WIFE MADE FOR TO SUMMON THE DOCTOR.

I TOLD HER YOU WERE SLEEPING AND THAT REST WAS THE BEST MEDICINAL.



DO YOU LIKE MY GARDEN?

OH INDEED, A DELIGHT.

I DOUBT THERE IS A FINER TOWN GARDEN IN ALL OF LONDON. IT IS MY PRIZE AND MY PRIDE.

PIERS.



OH, NO SOONER DO I SPEAK THAN I AM MADE A LIAR, FOR THE GARDEN IS BUT ONE OF MY MANY PRIDES. THE OTHER YOU SEE NOW ... MY FAMILY.

FIRSTLY, THIS IS MY LOVELY WIFE, DAPHNE.



THIS IS MY
OLDEST SON,
SINCLAIR.

MY
NEXT SON,
TIMOTHY.

MY
BEAUTIFUL
DAUGHTER,
BLANCHE.

AND THE
TWO YOUNGEST,
EMMA AND
RUPERT.



YOU ARE
MOST WELCOME
IN OUR HOME,
MR...ER...

OH YES,
I NEVER DID
LEARN YOUR
NAME.

I AM NOT ABLE TO
GIVE YOU IT. I AM
UNSURE OF THAT...
AS I AM WHY I WAS
ON THE LANE WHERE
YOU FOUND ME.

IT IS ALL A
RIDDLE, AND IF I
ENJOYED RIDDLES
BEFORE--

--I DO NOT
KNOW, BUT CAN
SAY WITH CERTAINTY
THAT I DO NOT
ENJOY THEM
NOW.

WELL, DO NOT
WEAKEN YOURSELF
WITH WORRY, MY
FRIEND. YOUR
MEMORY WILL
RETURN. UNTIL THEN
YOU ARE OUR GUEST.

OH, INDEED
YES. PLEASE, PLEASE
STAY OUR GUEST UNTIL
YOU ARE WELL...



...OUR HOUSE
IS A LARGE ONE
AND WELCOMES
YOU. OH, PLEASE
SAY YOU'LL STAY
AWHILE.

WITH
KINDNESS
SUCH AS
YOURS,

HOW
COULD I
REFUSE?

The days pass like hymns in church to a young boy who'd rather spend his Sabbath in the field- -belated, and with a torpor bordering on malicious.

I am that young boy. And this city is the field where on the brightest, sunniest of Sundays I might yet uncover the mystery of myself.

SIR,
MY DEAR
SIR.

WHERE WOULD
YOU BE GOING
AT THIS
HOUR?

I FELT LIKE
TALKING A WALK.
THE OUTDOORS SEEMS
SO SOUNDLY CLIMATE
THAT I COULD SCARCE
RESIST PARTAKING OF
THE AIRS.

BUT MY FATHER
FEARS IN YOUR
WEAKENED STATE,
THE STREETS MAY
BE YOUR UN-
DOING.

TIGER BAY PERHAPS, IN
THE WORST PART OF EAST
LONDON, WHERE YOUR
FATHER FOUND ME PERHAPS.
YES, PERHAPS.

BUT SURELY NOT
THESE PLEASANT
STREETS, WITH THEIR
GENTRY ABOUND-
ING.

NONE THE LESS
I MUCH INSIST MY
FATHER'S WISHES BE
UPHELD. HE IS A GENTLE
SOUL WHO WORRIES
FOR ALL HIS FELLOWS.
YOU, HIS GUEST, HE
FRET'S FOR MORE THAN
EVEN HIS CHILDREN. I
SHOULD HATE TO SEE
HIM SUFFER IF YOU
BECAME UNDONE.

OR
LOST.



WHAT IS IT SINCLAIR? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

OUR GOOD GUEST WOULD GO A-WALKING, BLANCHE. HE WOULD TAKE OF THE AIRS ABOUT.

OH NO, NO, NO. FATHER GAVE EXPRESS WISHES THAT YOU STAY INSIDE UNTIL WE ARE SURE YOU ARE FULLY WELL.



COME, SIR. PLEASE, I BID YOU. RETURN TO THE GARDEN WITH ME.



MOLLY!

YES, M'LIM. YES?

TEA AND A TRAY OF THOSE WONDERFUL SUGAR BISCUITS THAT COOK MADE.

AT ONCE, M'LIM.



OH, AND BRING THEM TO THE GARDEN, WHERE I SHALL BE WITH OUR GUEST.



HERE, THE DAY IS JUST AS BONNY AMONG THE FLOWERS. AND SO MUCH PRETTIER.

YES, INDEED THE FLOWERS ARE A DELIGHT.

Tho' more and more the vines seem as binding as the bars of a debtor's gaol.



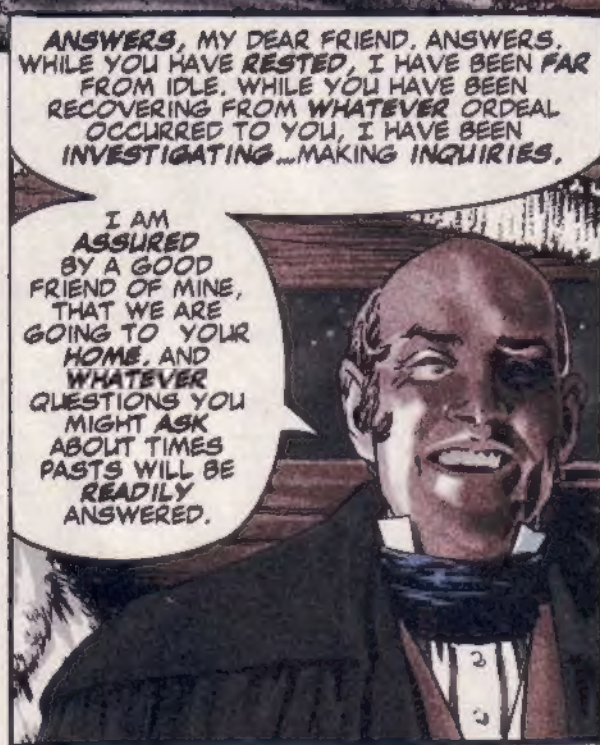
YOU ARE A HANDSOME MAN, YOU KNOW THAT, OF COURSE.

NO, MISS LUDLOW. I DID NOT.



I AM RELIEVED TO BE OUT. THE NIGHT IS FRESH AND HAS THE SMELL OF LAVENDER ABOUT IT. I THANK YOU FOR THIS TIME.

BUT WHAT, PRAY TELL, IS THE REASON FOR THE EXCURSION?



ANSWERS, MY DEAR FRIEND. ANSWERS. WHILE YOU HAVE RESTED, I HAVE BEEN FAR FROM IDLE. WHILE YOU HAVE BEEN RECOVERING FROM WHATEVER ORDEAL OCCURRED TO YOU, I HAVE BEEN INVESTIGATING...MAKING INQUIRIES.

I AM ASSURED BY A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE, THAT WE ARE GOING TO YOUR HOME, AND WHATEVER QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT ASK ABOUT TIMES PASTS WILL BE READILY ANSWERED.



BUT YOUR WHOLE FAMILY IS HERE.

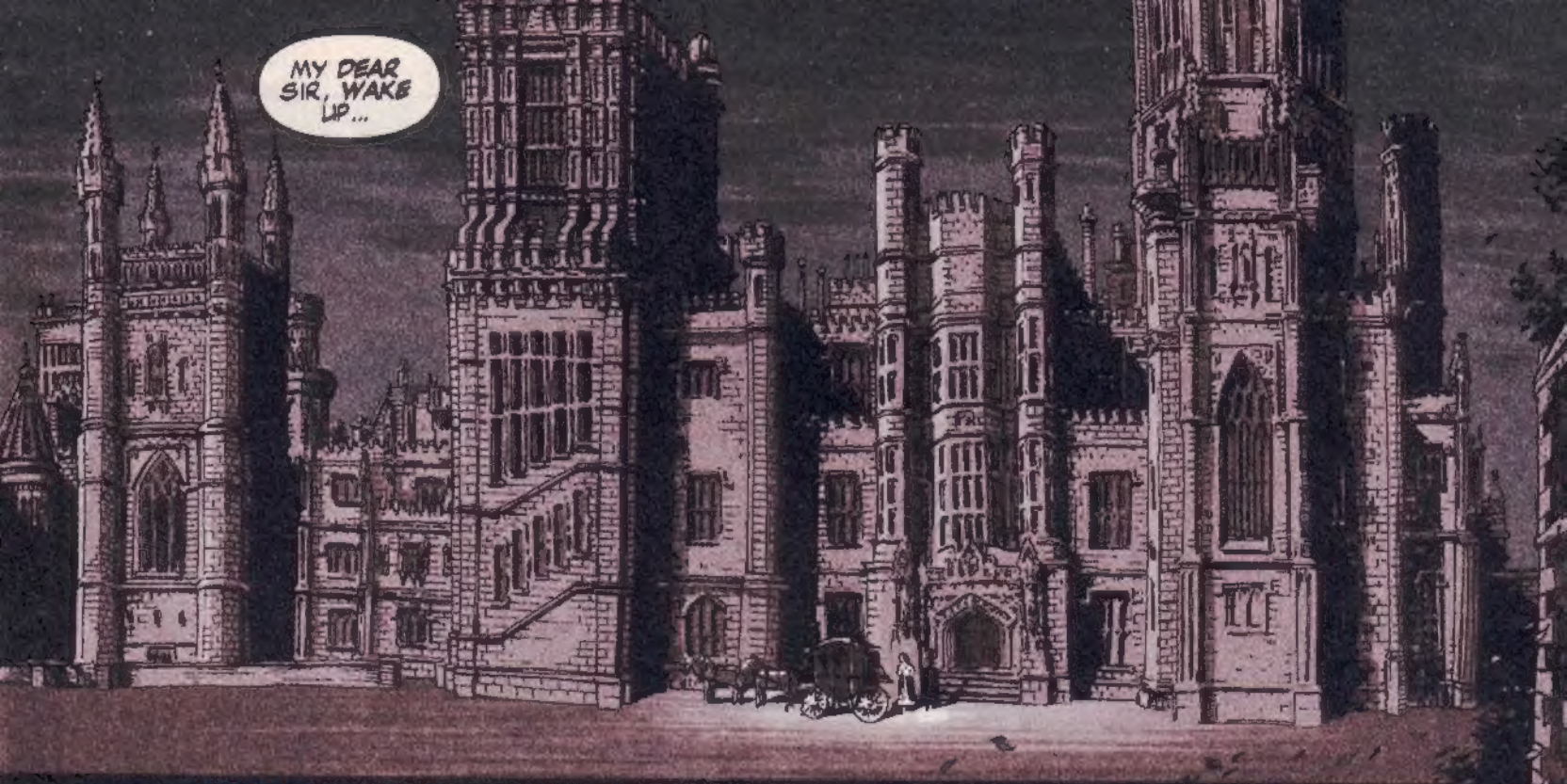
NOT ALL. THE YOUNGEST TWINS ARE AT HOME, AND SINCLAIR HAS BUSINESS ELSEWHERE. BUT ALL THE REST OF US WOULD SHARE IN THE JOY OF WHATEVER REUNION IS TO COME. IS THAT SO WRONG?



NO.

I SUPPOSE NOT.

NOW SETTLE BACK AND ENJOY THE RIDE. MY DRIVER ASSURES ME WE WILL BE IN SIGHT OF YOUR HOME SCANT TWO HOURS HENCE.



MY DEAR
SIR, WAKE
UP...



...WE ARE
HERE.

DID I
DOZE?

FOR A
WHILE, THESE
JOURNEYS CAN
BE TIRING.



ALIGHT
NOW, ALL
OF US
ALIGHT.

LET US SPEAK
TO THE MASTER
OF THIS HOUSE.



THE
DOOR IS
OPEN.

THEN WALK
IN. ANNOUNCE
YOURSELF.





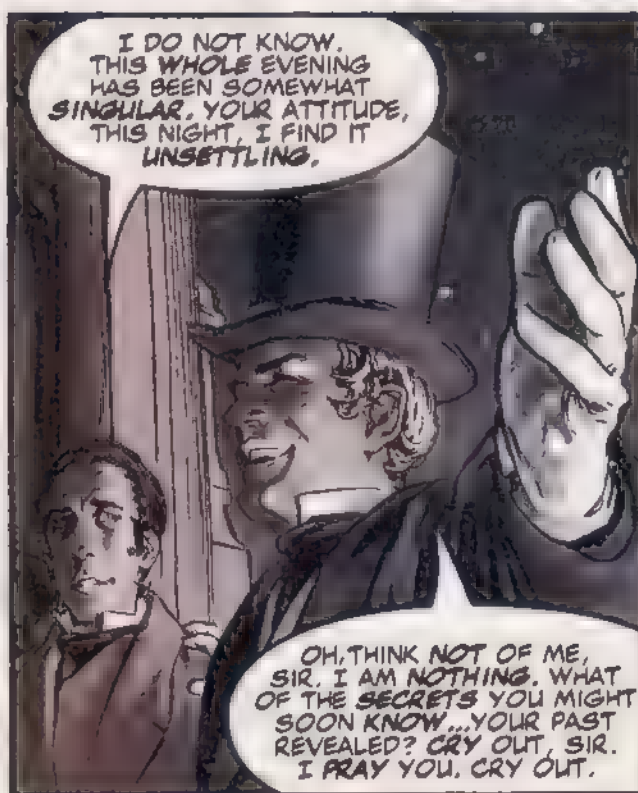
THERE DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE ANYONE HERE.

ARE YOU SURE? HAVE YOU CRIED OUT? THEY MIGHT BE SLEEPING.



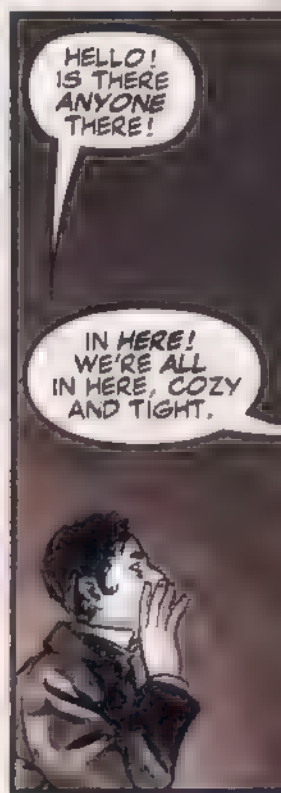
I AM FEARFUL.

WHY? WHY WOULD YOU FEAR TO BE KNOWN?



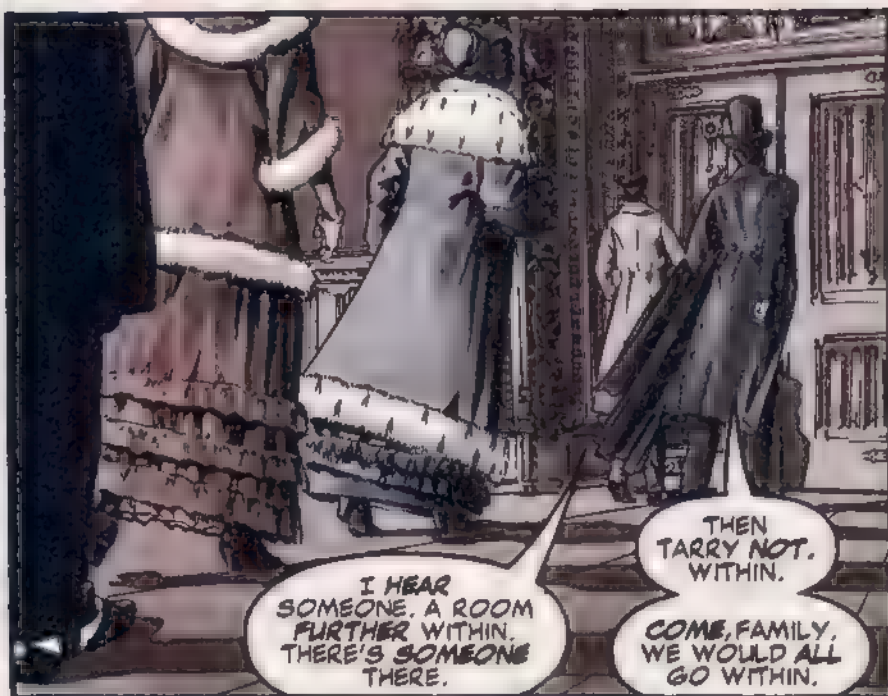
I DO NOT KNOW. THIS WHOLE EVENING HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT SINGULAR. YOUR ATTITUDE, THIS NIGHT, I FIND IT UNSETTLING.

OH, THINK NOT OF ME, SIR. I AM NOTHING. WHAT OF THE SECRETS YOU MIGHT SOON KNOW...YOUR PAST REVEALED? CRY OUT, SIR. I PRAY YOU, CRY OUT.



HELLO! IS THERE ANYONE THERE!

IN HERE! WE'RE ALL IN HERE, COZY AND TIGHT.



I HEAR SOMEONE. A ROOM FURTHER WITHIN. THERE'S SOMEONE THERE.

THEN TARRY NOT. WITHIN.

COME, FAMILY, WE WOULD ALL GO WITHIN.

LOOK, THERE'S A LIGHT ON IN THIS ROOM.

I RECOGNIZE THE VOICE. IS THIS MY MEMORY COMING BACK? WILL I SOON RECALL IT ALL?

PERHAPS.



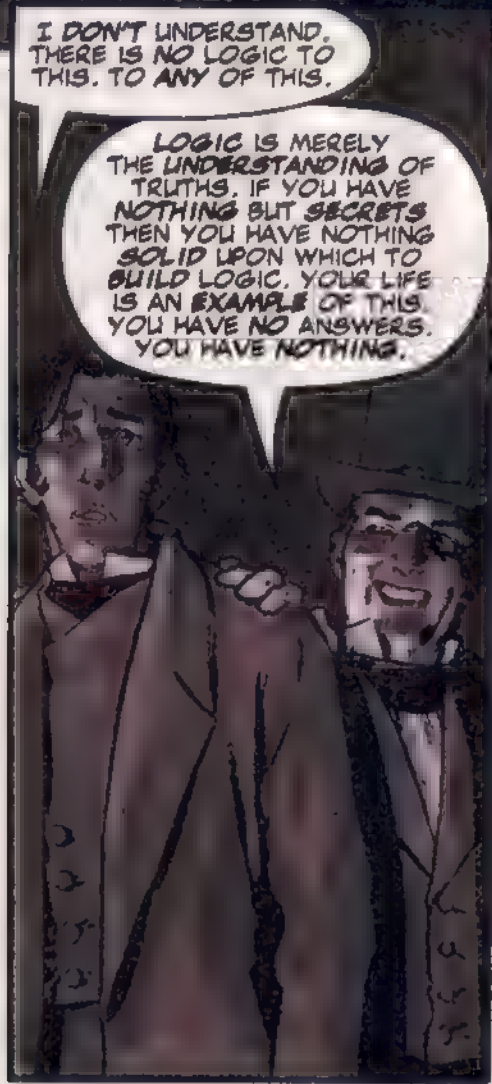
OR PERHAPS IT WAS BECAUSE THE VOICE WAS MINE AND YOU ONLY HEARD IT A FEW SHORT HOURS AGO.

SINCLAIR?!

THAT'S RIGHT.

AND THIS OTHER MAN?

DEAD. QUITE DEAD. AT LEAST HE'D BETTER BE. I STABBED HIM ENOUGH.



I DON'T UNDERSTAND. THERE IS NO LOGIC TO THIS. TO ANY OF THIS.

LOGIC IS MERELY THE UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTHS. IF YOU HAVE NOTHING BUT SECRETS THEN YOU HAVE NOTHING SOLID UPON WHICH TO BUILD LOGIC. YOUR LIFE IS AN EXAMPLE OF THIS. YOU HAVE NO ANSWERS. YOU HAVE NOTHING.



YOU PROMISED ME ANSWERS. THAT IS WHY WE ARE HERE, IS IT NOT?

WELL, NO. I AM HERE SO MY ALREADY ABUNDANT WEALTH MIGHT MULTIPLY AND THE ADJECTIVE "EVEN WEALTHIER" MIGHT APPLY TO ME.

YOU ARE HERE TO DIE, TO PLAY THE PAWN'S GAME AND FALL FOR A GREATER CAUSE.

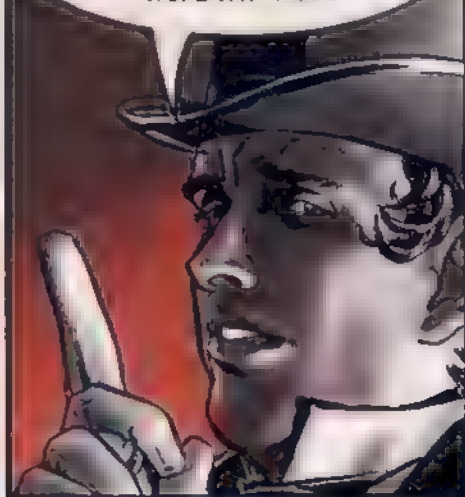


BUT I DID INDEED PROMISE ANSWERS AND ALTHOUGH I CAN GIVE NONE FOR YOUR LIFE BEFORE THE NIGHT WE CHANCED TO MEET, I CAN AT LEAST TELL YOU WHY YOU'LL SOON BE ACCOMPANYING THIS POOR UNFORTUNATE TO THE HERE-AFTER.

I HAVE A BUSINESS OF SORTS. YES, I ADMIT, I MAKE SOME COIN TRADING IN THE CITY. I HAVE MY OWN SEAT AT MANY COFFEE HOUSES, AND INDEED IT WAS ONLY THE OTHER DAY WHILE AT ONE THAT I MADE A DEAL BRINGING ME SOME 200 GUINEAS.



BUT MY REAL BUSINESS IS PARTNERSHIPS. THE MAKING AND THE BREAKING OF THEM. OVER THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, USING DIFFERENT COMPANY NAMES AND FALSE INFORMATION WHERE I MIGHT COVER MY TRAIL, I HAVE STRUCK PARTNERSHIPS WITH VARIOUS OTHER WEALTHY MEN.



THE ART IS IN THE FINDING OF THEM, YOU SEE, FOR THEY MUST BE WEALTHY OF COURSE, BUT ALSO RECLUSIVE YET OPEN TO MAKING A PROFIT. SHOW ME A WEALTHY HERMIT CONTENT WITH WHAT HE HAS AND IN GETTING NO MORE, AND I AM RUINED.

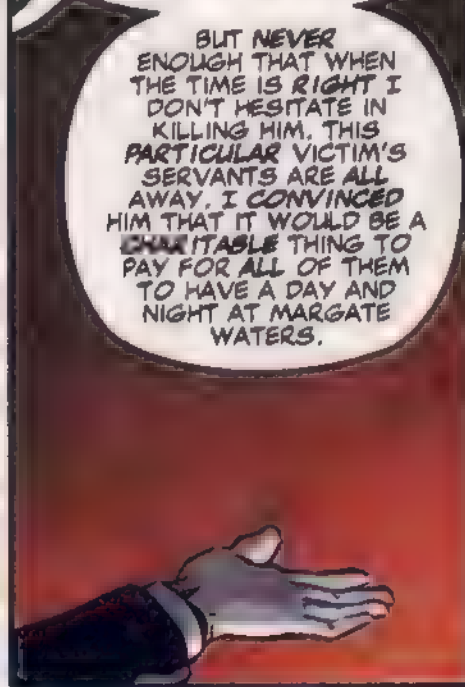


BUT ONCE EVERY FEW YEARS I'LL GO INTO PARTNERSHIP WITH SOMEONE WHO DESIRES REPRESENTATION IN THE CITY BUT WANTS LITTLE OF THE CITY HIMSELF.



THAT PERSON MUST BE WITHOUT FAMILY TOO. YOU SEE HOW THE FINDING IS THE CHALLENGE?

AND I CONDUCT BUSINESS WITH AND FOR MY PARTNER. SOMETIMES WE MAKE A PROFIT TOO. SOMETIMES I EVEN BEGIN TO LIKE THE FELLOW.



BUT NEVER ENOUGH THAT WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT I DON'T HESITATE IN KILLING HIM. THIS PARTICULAR VICTIM'S SERVANTS ARE ALL AWAY. I CONVINCED HIM THAT IT WOULD BE A CHARITABLE THING TO PAY FOR ALL OF THEM TO HAVE A DAY AND NIGHT AT MARGATE WATERS.

AND SO HE WAS ALONE.

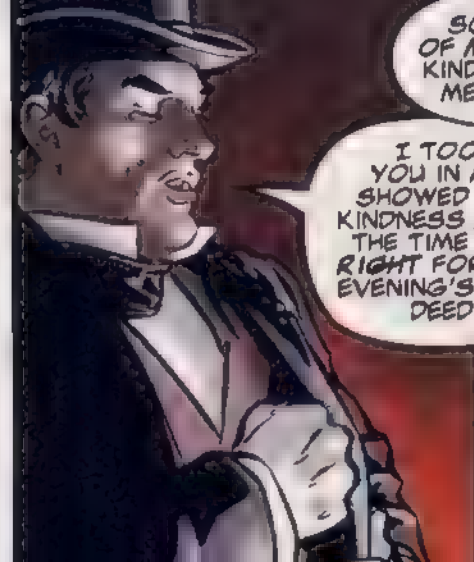
AND SO MY DEAR SON, SINCLAIR, COULD DO HIM IN.



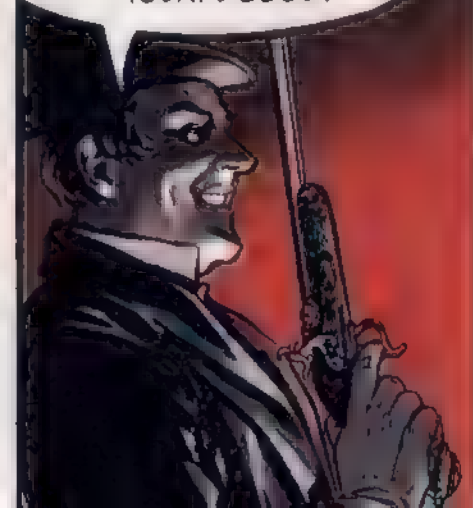
AS HIS PARTNER, I WILL GAIN ALL HIS WORTH. AS I HAVE ON EIGHT OTHER OCCASIONS IN THE PAST SCORE OF YEARS.

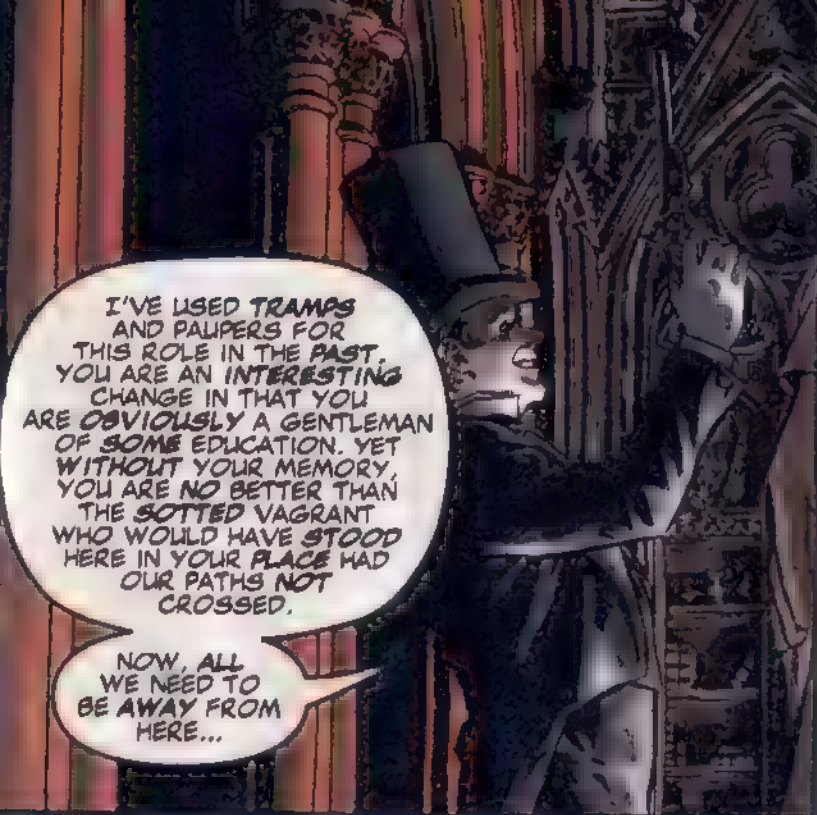
SO WHAT OF ME? YOUR KINDNESS TO ME? WHY?

I TOOK YOU IN AND SHOWED YOU KINDNESS UNTIL THE TIME WAS RIGHT FOR THIS EVENING'S DARK DEED.



I NEED SOMEONE FOR THE AUTHORITIES TO BLAME. I MAKE THE ATTACK LOOK LIKE A FAILED ROBBERY. WITH THIEF AND VICTIM STRUGGLING, AND EACH KILLING THE OTHER. YOU STABBED HIM, HE SHOT YOU. YOU UNDERSTAND THE SCENARIO THE SERVANTS WILL RETURN TO FIND LATER TODAY? GOOD.





I'VE USED TRAMPS
AND PALPERS FOR
THIS ROLE IN THE PAST.
YOU ARE AN INTERESTING
CHANGE IN THAT YOU
ARE OBVIOUSLY A GENTLEMAN
OF SOME EDUCATION. YET
WITHOUT YOUR MEMORY,
YOU ARE NO BETTER THAN
THE SOTTED VAGRANT
WHO WOULD HAVE STOOD
HERE IN YOUR PLACE HAD
OUR PATHS NOT
CROSSED.

NOW, ALL
WE NEED TO
BE AWAY FROM
HERE...



...IS YOU
DEAD.



LOOK ALIVE,
EVERYONE. HE'S A
RUNNER!

FIND HIM!

CATON
MEMBER

THERE, I
THINK HE RAN
THERE!

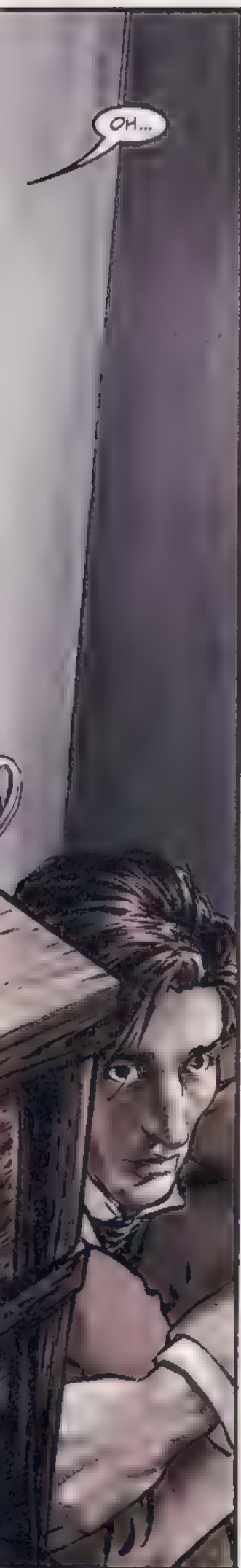
WHAT I
SUGGEST IS
THAT WE ARE
ALL AS QUIET
AS CHURCH
MICE UNTIL WE
HAVE SOMETHING
TO SHOUT
ABOUT.

NO ONE SAYS
A WORD UNTIL HE'S
SIGHTED, WHEN YOU
CAN YELL YOUR
HEAD OFF.

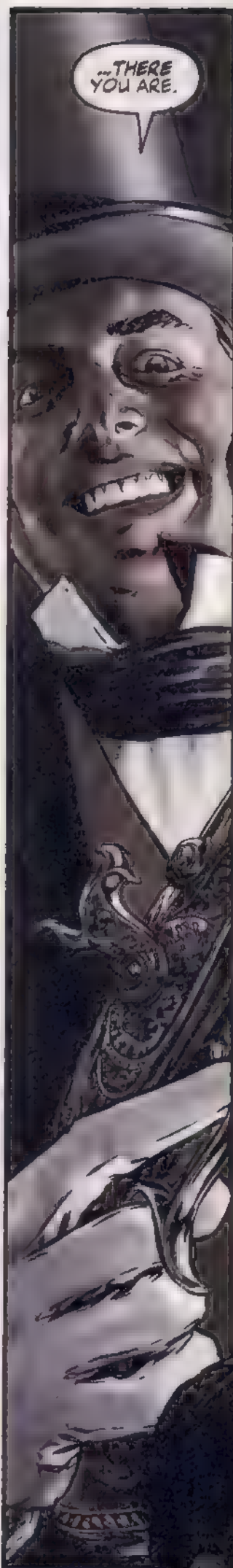
BUT UNTIL
THEN...



"...EVERYONE
QUIET."



OH...



...THERE
YOU ARE.



NICE OF YOU
TO ADD A LITTLE
SPORT TO THE
EVENING. VERY
CONSIDERATE.

BUT I'M TOO
OLD FOR MALARKEY.
I LIKE MY KILLINGS
DONE WITH A LITTLE
DECORUM NOWA-
DAYS.

*I had no
idea...*

*...until that
moment.*

No idea what
I was capable
of doing.

Or being.



But I
was quick
to learn.



NO! NOT
MY BOY! NOT
MY
SON!

PIERS!
PIERS!



SIR...

DON'T HAVE
ME KILLED. I
BEG YOU. DON'T
DO IT.

I KNOW NOT
WHAT MAN YOU
ARE WITH SUCH
ABILITY, BUT I
KNOW I COULD
MAKE YOU HAPPY
IN WHATEVER WAY
YOU DESIRED ME
TO.

I COULD
BE YOUR SERVANT,
YOUR SLAVE. PLEASE
SIR, DO NOT TAKE
MY LIFE.

NO,
SIR!





MY DEAR SIR!
WHERE IN GOD'S
NAME HAVE YOU
BEEN? I HAVE
SPENT THESE LAST
WEEKS LOOKING HIGH
AND LOW ACROSS
THE CITY FOR YOU.

UM, I WAS
AWAY FROM LONDON
FOR A DAY. NOW I
AM BACK.

WELL IT'S A
LUCKY THING WE
FIND EACH
OTHER.

ERR, ARE WE
ACQUAINTED?

OH I SHOULD
SAY THAT WE ARE.
INDEED WE ARE. DON'T
YOU RECOGNIZE ME?
SURELY YOU RECALL
YOUR OLD FRIEND
CHARLES.

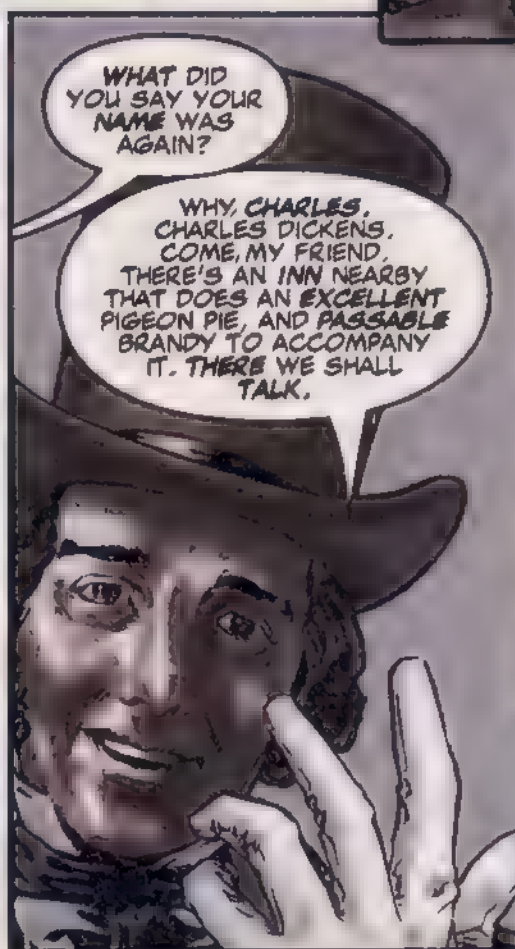
NO, I'M
SORRY, I DON'T
REMEMBER
ANYTHING.



WHAT OF THE
TERRIBLE NIGHT? THE
NIGHT OF CULP AND
DEATH? WHEN YOU SAVED
MY LIFE? YOU MUST
REMEMBER THAT!

NO.

THEN I
HAVE A TALE
FOR YOU, INDEED,
A DARK TALE.



WHAT DID
YOU SAY YOUR
NAME WAS
AGAIN?

WHY, CHARLES.
CHARLES DICKENS.
COME, MY FRIEND,
THERE'S AN INN NEARBY
THAT DOES AN EXCELLENT
PIGEON PIE, AND PASSABLE
BRANDY TO ACCOMPANY
IT. THERE WE SHALL
TALK.



OH, BUT WHY
ARE YOU DRESSED
SO? YOU NORMALLY
FAVOR CLOTHING OF
A FAR DARKER
SHADE.



THE MAN WHO TOOK OUR FAMILY IS STILL ABROAD IN THIS CITY. STILL ALIVE.

OUR FAMILY LIES BENEATH THE SOD AND HE ROAMS FREE.

WE CAN NOT BRING HIM TO THE AUTHORITIES, OR OUR OWN FAMILY'S CRIMES MAY SEE THE LIGHT. OUR FORTUNE MAY BE SEIZED.

WHAT CAN WE DO?



VENGEANCE WILL OUT, SISTER. PLEDGE IT HERE ON THE GRAVE OF OUR FATHER. PLEDGE THAT WE WILL PLAN AND QUEST AND GIRD OUR CHILDREN TO DO LIKEWISE.

WE WILL HAVE THIS MAN DEAD, IF IT TAKES OUR LIFETIMES AND THOSE OF OUR OFFSPRING.




PLEDGE IT!

I DO!



THEN THE MAN IN BLACK IS A DOOMED ONE.



*I had forgotten
the youngest Ludlows.
The twins. Of no
consequence, I
thought.*

*Had I known
what was to come,
I would have hunted
them down and killed
them before they could
sire.*

*Had I
known.*

*I would next
cross swords and
spite with a Ludlow
in 1865. They
would have surprise
on their side that day
and I would come
as close to death as
I believe I can.*

*No. I am wrong.
There was that time
in 1931, when
Natalie Ludlow
gave me poison.
That was the worse
of it.*

*Both encounters and
the other battles I
shared with this Ludlow
or that will all be told
and deserve the telling.*

*But outside the
Opal streets are crisply
cool with the first mellow
winds of October after a
particularly bleak summer
that lingered too long.*

*I think a
walk is due
me.*

END OF
PART ONE

FROM THE SHADE'S JOURNAL

It began with a game of cards. It ended with a headless man.

The year was 1912. The great war was still far enough away that those of us who chose not to view the world in the greater picture that wise men view it had managed to ignore the likelihood that there would be a war at all. We were the fools, of course. But wise men often measure their wisdom in the lines of sadness upon their face, knowing all they know. We, the fools who dance our merry jigs through life, are happier for the ignorance. And I, for one fool, had enough knowledge of sorrow of otherworldly sources. I had had my fill.

The events that occurred were slow—slow for me, in that it all happened aboard a train. The train was taking me across Europe from Prussia where I had defeated a ghost for a tidy fee, paid me by the owner of the castle the ghost had decided to haunt. I was feeling grand. I was feeling wealthy. The dining coach had an excellent kitchen, and the wild boar with prune jelly was a treasure I had no problem burying within me.

The train also had a welcome selection of wines.

My destination was Vienna, ultimately, although I had no timetable to be met, and hoped I might find many amiable distractions to keep me from where I was heading. I was glad to take as long as I had to.

"You look like a man with a secret."

It was a young man with a distinct Italian accent who said this. I had finished my meal, and venturing to the smoking compartment enjoyed a glass of port with a cigar of indomitable length. The young man had entered just ahead of me, with a Madeira and a dark papered cigarette. He was handsome but had a slight look of a rogue about him. Of course I immediately saw him as a kindred spirit.

"Secret," I replied. "I have many. Why should that be of interest to anyone but myself?"

"I mean you no insult by this, sir. Indeed, I hope that my remark might make for a cheerful introduction."

"No insult was taken. But it is my observation that people make others' acquaintance with remarks about the weather, not about what dark unspeakables lurk within a fellow."

"My name is Dario Carlei," he said.

"A fine name."

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"Grazie."

"And what is your occupation, to have you aboard such a tidy and timely locomotive?"

"I am a gambler."

"In life or at the card table?"

"One cannot be the latter within being a little of the former too."

I smiled. "Indeed."

"Of late I've won more than I've lost," he said, "and so have found my pleasures in such stately transportation. What of you, sir? Your elegant dress betrays some worthy occupation of your own."

"I am a traveler," I replied with a cloud of cigar smoke. "I have no need of work. Not in the conventional sense at least."

"Do you play cards?"

"I do. I enjoy a game."

"Poker?"

"No. Baccarat is more my speed, and pontoon. And whist."

"Rummy?"

"Indeed, rummy is my favorite."

"Would you care for a game?"

"There is nothing better to do this night," I said. "Though with just the two of us, it seems sorry sport."

"My dear sir!"

Dario had turned from me in that moment and called to a third gentleman in the compartment who sat reading. The man was tall and had girth but moved with such speed that his size seemed the slighter for it. The man raised his eyes from his book and looked our way.

"My dear sir," Dario repeated. "My colleague and I intend to play cards. Rummy. We wondered if you might have interest in joining us?"

The man seemed hesitant for a moment but arose and walked over to us, shifting slightly side by side as he moved to counterbalance the rocking of the train. He spoke in an accent I immediately knew as English... from Yorkshire, perhaps, and definitely the Midlands.

"I might have interest in a hand or two," he said, "as long as the wagers we make aren't too extreme."

"But where is the sport if they aren't?" Dario asked with a smile that I saw as his being a fox sighting a fine, plump hen.

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